

VU Research Portal

Gro Harlem Brundtland: A True Social Democrat

Ribberink, J.C.A.P.

published in
Social Europe Journal
2006

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)
Ribberink, J. C. A. P. (2006). Gro Harlem Brundtland: A True Social Democrat. *Social Europe Journal, Autumn*, 72-77. <http://www.social-europe.com>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

GRO HARLEM BRUNDTLAND, a true Social Democrat

Anneke Ribberink

“My name is Gro!”¹ If you were to choose one sentence to epitomise the former Prime Minister of Norway, then this one is appropriate. She hated formalities and ostentation. During her career Gro Harlem Brundtland developed a social-democratic based egalitarian vision for the future of society that is still significant at the present time. In 1997 she summed up her ideas in one sentence as follows:

“As a social democrat I strive to change society in such a way that it is healthy for people, enhances equality and distributes primary needs in an honest way.”²

Without diminishing her importance in reducing the gender gap at all levels in society and as a Director General of the WHO, this essay will especially pay attention to her role as leader of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and to the socio-economic policy under her premiership. These areas will clarify the choices Brundtland made in the ongoing debate on the course of social democracy. This essay will show that she combined her ideas about the need for making the world healthier and for eradicating poverty with the so-called Nordic model for a welfare society. In this way she placed herself in the egalitarian and collectivist tradition as well as the green strand of social democracy.

Some life data

Gro Harlem was born on 20 April 1939. Her Swedish mother, Inga Brynolf, had studied law. Her father was a physician. Gro had two brothers and one sister. Both parents were the centre of a social-democratic circle. Her father, Gudmund Harlem, was a cabinet-minister twice in the years 1955-1965. At 6 years old, Gro became a member of the social democratic youth organisation. Her career developed quickly at school as well as in the party. Her qualities as a politician were soon clear to many. At Oslo University she studied medicine until 1963. After she finished her study she worked for several years, from 1965-1974, as a physician and as associate director for Oslo School Health Services. On 9 December 1960 she married the young student in international law, Arne Olav Brundtland. The marriage would bear four children, three boys and a girl. The youngest son Jörgen, who suffered from severe depression, committed suicide in 1991, during Gro's third term as Prime Minister. It was to

be the greatest tragedy of her life. She wrote openly and extensively about this sad episode in her autobiography. The report about her agonizing feelings of guilt is very moving. As a result of the emotional stress she divided her job in 1992 and handed over the party leadership to Thorbjörn Jagland.

Her political star had been rising from the day she became environmental minister - from 1974-1979. In 1975 GHB became deputy party leader, in 1977 member of parliament and in 1981 full party leader and Prime Minister for the first time. She was Norway's first female PM and besides this was the youngest until that time. She would fulfill 4 terms (1981, 1986-1989, 1990-1993, 1993-1996). From 1998-2003 GHB was Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The Brundtland Commission

Informally, in March 1982, Gro Harlem Brundtland was asked by UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar whether she would be interested in presiding over a commission due to investigate world wide problems relating to the environment, poverty and population. One motivation presented by the Secretary General was that Gro Harlem Brundtland happened to be the only (former) Prime Minister with a history in dealing with environmental problems as a minister. Apart from her environmental past, she had acquired a position in dealing with problems concerning safety and armaments because of her membership of the Palme Commission (1980-1981). It was only natural for her, as a true Social Democrat, to integrate her thoughts about the necessity of disarmament into the way she looked at world problems. So, all things considered, she did not need to think long, when in December 1983 the formal request was made by the UN General Assembly. She gathered a commission consisting of government officials, financial specialists and policy-makers in the field of science, technology and agriculture, with the greater part from developing countries. This was smart, because it assured the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) of acceptance from these countries in a way that would not have taken place had the commission been composed otherwise.

In the fall of 1987 the report, *Our Common Future*, was finished and presented to UN's General Assembly, session 42. It would bring Gro Harlem Brundtland much praise from all over the world, from scientists as well as political leaders, not least from the developing countries. No wonder, since the report presented an integrated vision of world problems under the concept 'sustainable development', meaning a vision of economic growth that

would be favourable to all countries of the world, without damaging effects for future generations.

“Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.(...)technology and social organizations can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth. The Commission believes that widespread poverty is no longer inevitable”.³

The report pleaded for the rich countries to hand over part of their wealth to the developing countries and to stop or at least reduce as much as possible environmental pollution. One way this process could come into effect was if the rich countries spent less money on the arms race. In the most urgent cases (plan for Tropical Forests, Plan for Desertification, plan for clean water, plan for contraceptive materials) less than one month of world wide arms spending would be enough for financing these programmes together. At the same time the developing countries should be allowed economic growth that would stop or at least reduce their poverty problems and the population problems which result from that poverty. It was understood that no economic growth could take place without at least some environmental pollution, but the developing countries should be helped by being advised on non-polluting industries and technology. It was an integrated and stimulating vision, completely in balance with Brundtland’s own egalitarian and social democratic ideas. Its great merit was its logic. Who in the world would doubt that the path set out in the report was the right one? Because of this it got such a good reception and because of this the concept ‘sustainable development’ was to stay on the UN’s agenda for the future. And this was a success in itself.

And yet, was the road sketched not just all too easy and simple? As called for in the report, in 1992 a follow up conference was organised in Rio de Janeiro, where Gro Harlem Brundtland delivered the opening speech. Results from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro included a treaty on global warming and deforestation, a Biodiversity Convention and a plan for the future (Agenda 21), setting out strategic aims. Nevertheless, the disappointing conclusion from the 1992 conference itself was, that – no matter how much had been done already – too little had been achieved in terms of the Brundtland Report; a message repeated at a UN conference on ‘sustainable development’ in Johannesburg in 2002.

No doubt Gro Harlem Brundtland was sincere in the aims she put forward. From the day she began her medical studies she was convinced that health problems were not just an individual issue, but were linked to welfare, poverty and the environment. As a minister for

the environment she already did her utmost to combat acid rain and she succeeded in preventing a national disaster when oil poured into the North Sea from a sinking platform. Her personal result as Prime Minister was Norway's share in development aid, rising from 0.7 per cent of GNP to more than 1 per cent in the early 1990s. During her fourth term she demonstrated sincerity and courage when at the UN Population and Development Conference in Cairo in 1994 she dared to make a connection in a speech between religion and the meager way problems of population were being solved in developing countries because of resistance from the churches against contraceptives and abortion. This speech caused her to be strongly attacked in the Egyptian fundamentalist press.

One decision aroused world wide criticism and would be a serious blow to Brundtland's reputation as a champion of the environment. While *Our Common Future* called for restrictions on world fisheries and whaling, during her third term as PM the Norwegian government broke the international ban by resuming the harvesting of whaling in 1992. Brundtland's argument for allowing commercial whaling was that it only concerned redundant stocks. Furthermore the decision should be supported by a scientific commission of the International Whaling Committee. But that could not stop the international protests, including from such organisations as Greenpeace. There are those who say that the decision was designed to please the fishing population in Norway in order to make them pledge their vote to their country's membership of the European Union, that has a reputation for setting fishing quotas. But the Norwegian government fiercely denied this allegation.

Socio-economic policy

'Social justice' was of paramount importance for Gro Harlem Brundtland. This is also clear when looking at her performances in the socio-economic field when she was Prime Minister.

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland) do have vital characteristics in common, making them different from other industrialized countries. "Characteristics such as a large state sector, extensive welfare provisions, high social welfare costs, high taxes, generous benefits and active labour market policies have been used by various writers to describe the degree of 'Nordicness'".⁴ Other features are the relative equality in income distribution and the low degree of unemployment.

Norway is different from the other Nordic countries in that it possesses huge amounts of oil. Norway is therefore the richest of the Nordic countries. Just like Great Britain in the 1980s, the possession of oil prevented Norway from too great disasters in the economic field

when the depression made itself felt. The other side of the coin is that when there are problems with the oil, things go wrong in Norway as well. And that was just what happened in GHB's second term.

Especially in her second term (1986-1989), Gro Harlem Brundtland had a huge task in managing her country in the economic and social field. The heritage from the previous Conservative government under Kare Willoch was not a favourable one. After a period of zero economic growth in the beginning of the 1980s, the economy had been booming again with a GDP per capita of 5 per cent in 1985. The consequence was that Norway was living at far too high a level. Internal consumption was far too high, prices and wages were too high, as was inflation. In addition, there was a crisis in the oil industry, because prices had fallen down world wide. The Norwegian people lost 10 per cent of their income and there was a strong deficit in the national balance of payments. Another difficulty was, that Gro Harlem Brundtland presided over a minority government (as with all her cabinets) and stood up against a non-socialist majority in parliament. She reacted to the crisis in a Keynesian and Social Democratic way. The government's prescription was to impose a halt in the growth of wages at 4 per cent and a rise in the interest rate in order to curb national spending. Taxes were raised and the Norwegian currency was devaluated by 12 per cent to stimulate export. Oil prices were put in line with the OPEC regulations to give the economy a further boost. Last but not least, the people earning the highest incomes had to swallow a decrease by two percent. Gro Harlem Brundtland herself claims that one of the mainstays of her success was that she continuously consulted with the social partners, employers and trade unions, to get the necessary support for her governmental rules.

The result was impressive. The government managed to get the economy back on track again and by the 1989 election year, inflation had been curbed, the budget was showing a surplus and foreign trade was booming. However, the price to be paid was an unemployment rate that in two years' time had more than doubled from 2 to almost 5 per cent, low in comparison to other Western countries during that decade⁵, but high for a nation used to full employment. This last factor in particular caused a serious blow to the Social Democratic party at the elections: it received 34 per cent of the votes, compared to 40 per cent in 1985. And this notwithstanding the fact that political friends as well as adversaries and excellent economists praised Brundtland's government for its performance in economic terms. The unemployment rate would even be higher at the beginning of the 1990s (6% in 1993) and would be a burden until the end of her fourth term.

The struggle against unemployment was therefore high on the agenda of Brundtland's third and fourth cabinets (1990-1993 and 1993-1996). Her governments fought against unemployment in those years by increasing public spending. Still, public finances were relatively sound, with deficits at the beginning of the 1990s, but a surplus in 1994 and 1995. In this way they could pay for an activating employment policy. People, especially young people should work if they could and if there were any skills deficits these could be repaired by courses, prolonged education, training programmes and so on. Work places were being created by wage subsidies and financial support to employers. Social benefits would still be granted if necessary, but it should firstly be investigated whether or not a person could work. Indeed, social benefits were still high and, in addition, a huge amount of money went to the health, age and education sectors. Furthermore, child care was being improved from gender as well as economic motives in order to encourage the combination of work with family care. The result was a huge public sector in which many women worked. Government's share in total employment was 30 per cent in 1993 and 1994. The fight against unemployment was a success in so far that the figure went down again to 4 % in 1995. Besides, Norway's economy was prospering, certainly compared to its neighbours Sweden and Finland, both being in a depression during these years.

By the end of her fourth term Gro Harlem Brundtland could be satisfied. The Norwegian economy was prospering and its exports booming. Its specific form of welfare society, the precious pearl of the social democratic movement, was in tact (as in the other Nordic states). The majority of the Norwegian people were still behind the idea of welfare society, although there was criticism: too much bureaucracy and regulation, taxes too high, too much restriction of personal freedom and not always the certainty whether the measures for creating work places were actually that effective. A further political success was the creation of the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1991 – an idea especially promoted by Brundtland – although it was a great disappointment for her that in the referendum of 1994, the Norwegian people spoke out against entering the European Union by a slight majority of 52.-2 per-cent.

Final remarks

In her motto from 1997 cited in the introduction to this essay, Gro Harlem Brundtland summarized her egalitarian ideas about the road to a better world. Did she succeed in her goals?

Let us start with the difficult part, her aim to make the world healthier and more equal. The Brundtland Commission produced a report sketching the path the world should follow: 'sustainable development' should be striven after world wide. Unfortunately, not a fraction of what is necessary in this field has been realised as of yet, as is also shown in the recent movie *An inconvenient Truth* by Brundtland's good friend and former American vice-president Al Gore. Right now, still a quarter of the world population possesses three- quarters of the world's energy sources and countries such as China and India are using polluting industries in building their economies in a massive way. China is responsible for the second highest level of emission of CO₂ globally (after the United States of America). Presumably, by 2050 great parts of the third world will bear the consequences of global warming in the form of flooding and water shortages. That is, if we go on this way. Indeed, one solution might be to install some sort of supervisory body with directive powers – or to strengthen the directive powers of UN - and implement the ideas from the Brundtland Report. The road will be long and difficult, but the plan is there and this can be credited to Gro Harlem Brundtland and her commission.

European social democracy has more to be grateful as far as the legacy of the former Norwegian Prime Minister is concerned. In the ongoing debate on which socio-economic course to follow, she showed that the 'Nordic model of welfare society' deserves at least to be studied very carefully.

Of course, there was criticism on parts of the performance of Gro Harlem Brundtland, but the lesson she taught is that it is still relevant to be a true Social Democrat.

¹ Harlem Brundtland, G., (2002): Madam Prime Minister. A Life in Power and Politics, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 244

² Luttikhuis, P., (1997): Interview with Gro Harlem Brundtland, NRC Handelsblad, 15 September

³ World Commission on Environment and Development (1987): Our Common Future, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, p. 8.

⁴ Marklund, S. and A. Nordlund (1999): 'Economic problems, welfare convergence and political instability', in: Kautto, M., a.o. (eds.) (1999): Nordic Social Policy. Changing Welfare States, London: Routledge, pp. 19-53, over there p.19.

⁵ To give an example: in Great Britain under Thatcher unemployment rose to 8 % (3,5 million) in 1985. In the height of the depression in the Netherlands (1982) unemployment rose to 12 %.

Some references

Aerts, M. (2005): 'In afwachting van de première. Over sekse en het minister-presidentschap in Nederland', in: Te Velde, H. a.o. (2005): Omtrent de minister-president. De positie van de minister-president vanuit historisch perspectief, The Hague: Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties

Davis, R. (1995): 'Gro Harlem Brundtland', in: Wilsford, D. (ed.) (1995): Political Leaders of Contemporary Western Europe. A Biographical Dictionary, London, Mansell Publishing Ltd., pp. 49-56

Goodland, R., a.o. (eds.) (1991): Environmentally Sustainable Economic Development: Building on Brundtland, Paris, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Harlem Brundtland, G. (2002): Madam Prime Minister. A Life in Power and Politics, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Kautto, M., a.o. (eds.) (1999): Nordic Social Policy. Changing Welfare States, London, Routledge

Offermans, C., (2006): 'Zweer het dogma van groei af', NRC Handelsblad, 27/28 May

Ribberink, A., (2005): "'I don't think of myself as the first woman Prime Minister": Gender, Identity and Image in Margaret Thatcher's Career', in: Toye, R. and J. Gottlieb (eds.) (2005): Making Reputations. Power, Persuasion and the Individual in Modern British Politics, London/New York, IB Tauris, pp.166-179

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987): Our Common Future, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press

Anneke Ribberink is a senior university lecturer in contemporary history at the Vrije Universiteit (Free University) Amsterdam
e-mail: jcap.ribberink@let.vu.nl